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**TITLE**

The relationship between work-family conflict and work-related outcomes: evidence from China's new-generation employees

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## **ABSTRACT**

Existing studies have tried to depict the intriguing features of the work-family conflicts among Chinese employees, but very little has been done to explore the extent of such conflicts for China's new-generation employees who were born after 1980, and how this is linked with their level of work engagement and turnover. Drawing on a sample of 266 young employees in China, this study examines the relationships between the degree of work-family conflict (WFC) for China's new-generation employees and their work engagement and turnover intention. Based on the stressor-strain-outcomes framework, the paper makes effort to address this important research gap. The regression analysis results revalidate the dynamic 'WFC-work engagement-turnover intention' construct and shows that work engagement can be an effective mediator. Our finding challenges the conventional gendered discourse of WFC for Chinese employees, but it can by no means signify the arrival of a gender equality era.

## **WORDCOUNT**

6714

## Introduction

Existing studies have made effort to depict the intriguing features of the work-family conflicts (WFC) among Chinese employees (e.g. Choi, 2008; Foster and Ren, 2015; Lu and Cooper, 2015; Ling and Powell, 2001; Xiao and Cooke, 2012), but very little has been done to explore the extent of such conflicts for the ‘new generation’ employees in China, and how this is linked with their level of work engagement and turnover. Certainly, WFC has been recognised as one of the most intriguing challenges for contemporary workforce in light of the increasing concern of job intensification and people’s constant pursuit of better life (Richenda, Lewis, and Rapoport, 2006), with WFC having become eminent for employees, their families, organizations and societies (Bourhis and Mekkaoui, 2010). Many employees are frequently struggling to reconcile their work and family lives in a satisfying way (Kossek and Lambert, 2005), and this is not only a commonplace in developed, western societies, but also increasingly concerning in emerging economies such as China (Lu and Cooper, 2015).

It has been widely acknowledged that WFC could negatively affect employees’ work attitudes and behaviours, and lead to poor job satisfaction and commitment, and increased turnover intention (Allen, Herst, Bruck, and Sutton, 2000). Yet there has been limited research, based on an explicit theoretical framework, to examine specific generation of employees (Joshi, Decker, and Franz, 2011). This is especially the case for relevant research in China where there are large number of young employees whose WFC and the implications for turnover intention and work engagement are under-studied. As the WFC issue is heavily influenced by the broader economic, political, social and cultural developments (Coffey, Anderson, Zhao, Liu and Zhang, 2009), a clear understanding of these Chinese employees’ WFC issues needs to be associated with their work-family settings.

New-generation Chinese employees refer to those workers who were born after the 1980s and have also been referred as ‘post-1980s’, ‘post-1990s’ and ‘millennial’ employees in the country (Wu, Tang and Sun, 2018). Different from their previous generations, these employees often manifest unique work-family characteristics as they value more on work-family balance (Wu and Uen, 2015) but have to endure enormous work-family demands. Generally, they are better-educated and more likely to value career development and work engagement than the previous generations in a contemporary fast-changing and competitive society (e.g. Elegant, 2007; Yi, Ribbens and Morgan, 2010). Meanwhile, being the central focus of the more affluent families in China, they are more likely to be hampered by both their parents and grandparents (Moore, 2005), therefore their well-nurtured individualism, ‘do it on my own way’ mentality, results in their unique work behaviours such as an uncertain engagement and higher turnover intention (Yi, et al., 2010; Gu, Wang, Sun and Xu, 2010). Recent evidence shows that 38 per cent of young graduates in China have resignation

experience within 6 months after university and 65% employees born after the 1980s expect to leave their current jobs in the next 5 years (MyCOS, 2016; Deloitte, 2016).

Despite the prevailing work-family conflict issue for China's new-generation young employees, we know little about the underlying relationship between their unique characters and WFC, work engagement and turnover intention. To bridge this significant research gap and contribute to the WFC literature, this paper examines the association of new-generation employees' WFC, turnover intention and work engagement in the context of China's dramatic social and economic transformation. Based on the stressor-strain-outcomes model (Koeske and Keoske, 1993), we conducted a quantitative study and collected empirical data from 266 Chinese employees, all born after 1980, through questionnaire surveys. Theoretically the research adds to the human resource management (HRM) theory by investigating how the inter-role relationship can shape the work for a particular group of employees in the world's biggest labour market. Responding to the call for more research on the work-life/family issues for Chinese employees with rigorous testing models (Lu and Cooper, 2015), our enquiry offers a fresh proposition to understand the mediating effect of work engagement and turnover intention on the degree of work-family conflict. Practically, the study helps Chinese organisations to review their HR strategies in managing employee commitment and motivation associated with work-family conflict, as most of them need to pay attention to manage large amount of young generation employees.

## **Theoretical considerations of work-family conflict**

The issue of work-family conflict has long been examined by the academic communities. Using the role theory framework, Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) define WFC as a form of inter-role conflict where the role pressures from work and family spheres are mutually incompatible. For Greenhaus and Beutell (1985: 77), WFC is 'a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually non-compatible in some respect', with three types of WFC being identified: time-based, strain-based and behavior-based conflict. There is always a bidirectional conflict between individuals' roles in work and families (Gutek, Searle, and Kupa, 1991), as it is not easy to strike a balance between the two roles (Aryee, Fields, and Luk, 1999).

One of the key focuses of the existing research is to associate the impact of WFC with individuals' work attitudes and behaviours (Allen et al., 2000), with an emphasis on the detrimental consequence of WFC for the quality of life and well-being of work (Frone et al., 1992). Bellavia and Frone (2005) identify three outcomes of the WFC: work-related, family-related, and domain-unspecific outcomes, which have been verified by a meta-analysis conducted by Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, and Semmer (2011). Among the three types, the work-related outcome is the most frequently studied subject,

and the impact of work-to-family is stronger than that of family-to-work due to the highly rigid boundary at work (Clark, 2000).

Another focus of WFC is to comprehend its psychological and behavioural consequences at work, including work-related outcomes such as poor job satisfaction and commitment, emotional exhaustion and job burnout that may lead to serious work mistakes, decreased job performance and rising turnover intention (Allen et al., 2000). The negative association can be explained by the conservation-of-resources (COR) theory, which argues that individuals are motivated to acquire and protect personal resources like time and energy, and any loss of energy may generate stress and subsequently detrimental effect on their effective functioning (Hobfoll, 1989). When suffering from WFC, individuals are unlikely to maintain their resources appropriately and consequently there will be destructive outcomes regarding mental or physical, attitudinal or behavioural activities, resulting in work engagement and turnover issues.

#### *WFC and turnover intention*

Employee turnover is a critical issue for organizations, and the intention to resign deserves special attention because it is arguably the strongest and most reliable indicator of actual turnover (Liu and Onwuegbuzie, 2012). Employee turnover, especially higher rate of voluntary turnover, can be damaging as it is costly, can waste organisational resources and will undermine employee morale (Taylor, 2014). A wide range of studies has identified the positive relationship between WFC and employees' turnover intention (Boyar, Maertz Jr, Pearson and Keough, 2003; Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Collins, 2001). When employees constantly experience conflict between their work and family lives, they may choose to withdraw from work in order to eliminate the conflict (Boyar et al., 2003; Greenhaus et al., 2001).

#### *WFC and work engagement*

Work engagement refers to individuals' active integration with work by physical, cognitive or emotional input aimed to increase employees' positive, subjective experiences with organizations (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006). Because work engagement is an effective channel for the organization to create competitive advantage, it has attracted wide academic interest to explore the dominants, reasons and consequences of engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Many work-related characteristics such as management support and organizational fair procedures are influential to the level of work engagement (Saks, 2006). However, the predictive role of WFC on work engagement is not straightforward for each job characteristic. As Opie and Henn (2013) have noted, for employees with higher level of conscientiousness that is one of the job characteristics, WFC can decrease their work engagement level more than those with lower level of conscientiousness can. When the level of WFC influences employee wellbeing, work engagement is also modified because it emphasizes optimal functioning at work (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006). Research has found that both

directions of WFC have negative associations with employee wellbeing (Allen et al., 2000; Mauno, Ulla, and Mervi, 2007), and may lead to mental distress (Frone, 2003; Lapierre and Allen, 2006). In other words, when employees have less time and energy to devote into work or family roles due to WFC, their engagement for fulfilling their work role will become limited.

## **WFC in the Chinese context**

### *WFC for Chinese employees*

While the existing western literature provides helpful frameworks to analyse the WFC issue generally, it is necessary to turn our attention to the Chinese context for the purpose of this study because the nature of WFC issues is heavily shaped by different societies' distinctive economic, political, social, and cultural factors (Lu and Cooper, 2015). Unlike the issue in western societies, WFC in China is a less frequently mentioned topic at formal policy level except organizational level policies (Xiao and Cooke, 2012), although over 90 per cent of Chinese families are dual earners (China Labor Statistics Yearbook, 2016). Most Chinese employees are neither familiar with the concept of WFC, nor are they fully aware of the issue (Foster and Ren, 2015). Recently the work-family situation seems have worsened in China due to economic transition and demographic changes, with some research claiming that the issue is delineated with little optimism (Kim and Chung, 2016). Yet many Chinese employees tend not to be too resentful about the WFC (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

There are two main reasons explaining the low level of resentment towards WFC among Chinese employees. The first comes from the labour market pressure as many employees are forced to work excessively to secure job and career advancement and therefore they have got used to tolerate or accept the high demanding work nature (Choi, 2008; Coffey et al., 2009). In China's flexible, less stable and work-intensification labour market, it is normal for people to endure long working hours or heavy workload. The second reason is related to cultural norms, as the traditional Confucian work value perceives the hard-working attitude as motivation (Lu, Wang, Siu, Lu, and Du, 2015). Like many eastern cultures that prioritise work over the quality of life (Schein, 1984), Chinese culture prefers to put work demands above family (Choi, 2008; Lu, et al, 2015), and failing to meet the work demand may tarnish the 'hardworking' image and loose people's face at workplace (Lu, 2016). For many Chinese, work dedication is for the sake of family demand and glory, as work engagement is necessary for gaining long-term economic and other benefits for the whole family (Ling and Powell, 2001). Individuals who express out the concerns of WFC may deem as low committed employees (Foster and Ren, 2015), hence many would sacrifice their families for work (Ling and Powell, 2001). Therefore, despite the high tension between work and family in China, the issue has not seemed to be highlighted as much as in the west.

Another feature about WFC in China, as Lewis, Gamble and Rapoport (2007) state, is that it is still a gendered issue, whereas in many western countries there has been a tendency to underscore a gender-neutral discourse due to the development in equal opportunities. Although China has a high female employment rate, accounting for 48.8% of the entire labour force (China Labor Statistics Yearbook, 2016), the traditionally unbalanced gender social identity largely remains unchanged. Much of the existing literature echoes this point that there is little difference in work related responsibilities between male and female employees, but there is significant discrepancy for family responsibilities between the two groups (e.g. Choi, 2008; Coffey et al., 2009; Ling and Powell, 2001). With the conventional value that men are responsible for external affairs and women should be in charge of the household, heavy family responsibility means that female employees will have to suffer more from the conflict between work and family roles than their male counterparts.

### *WFC for China's new-generation employees*

Despite the growing interest in WFC theory and practice regarding Chinese employees in general (Lu and Cooper, 2015) and young employees in particular (Coffey et al., 2009), there has been inadequate research to examine this issue for the emerging younger generation employees in the country. By 2016, 53 per cent of China's urban labour force are 'young' employees aged 16-39 and the majority were born under the influence of only-child policy (China Labor Statistics Yearbook, 2016). Many are currently experiencing their early stages of their own career and families (Zhaopin, 2012), and there is an urgent need to understand the WFC issue for these employees because they are the backbone of most organizations and the country workforce. When the new-generation becomes an emerging and important part of the labour market, and are exposed to a world of faster globalization, consumerism, and advanced information, communication and technology (Tulgan and Martin, 2001), they are likely to show different work perceptions over work-family issues compared with their previous generations (Coffey et al., 2009). Especially with an emphasis on individualism and career-savvy, they tend to seek more on job opportunities with autonomy, promising career development, work-life balance, and good life quality than sacrificing family life (Wu and Uen, 2015; Yi et al., 2010).

Overall, the family role for China's new-generation employees is often shadowed by three types of work-related contradictions. The first one is the conflict between their expectation for flexibility and the rigid work arrangement. Due to fierce competition and uncertain prospect of employment, strict work arrangement, long working hours and performance-related systems are common in China (Xiao and Cooke, 2012), and this is against the preference of many young employees who advocate freedom and oppose rigid hierarchies and stringent management. The second type comes from their individualistic characteristics that are incompatible with the collectivist workplace, and this tension can spill over from work to family. The traditional Chinese workplace culture emphasizes group-based values, harmony and loyalty (Hofstede, 1980),



requiring employees to avoid opinions and behaviours that might disrupt the organizational harmony and benefits. But the new-generation employees tend to be proud of their own personalities and individualism, and expect the workplace environment to suit them, rather than to follow the traditional values like their predecessors (Wu and Uen, 2015). The third type of conflict arises from the contentious relationship between young employees and their managers, most of whom belong to previous generations (*ibid.*). Due to the marked difference in work characteristics between these generational cohorts, conflict can be easily arisen when managers fail to understand the new-generation employees (Yi et al, 2010).

Apart from the challenges at work, issues relating to family roles also play an important part to influence the level of WFC for China's new-generation employees. On the one hand, these employees need to embrace childcare responsibilities for young families (Coffey et al., 2009), and they need more resources than their parent generation due to the much higher cost for childcare, education and living cost. On the other hand, with insufficient help from public healthcare, they must take main responsibilities looking after their parents without the help of siblings in most cases because they are more likely to be the only-child generation (Choi, 2008). Such challenge is worsened by employers' indifferent attitudes towards employees' family issues because of the labour cost consideration (*ibid.*), and the fact that these employees' parent generation belong to the aging population that will live longer than before (Coffey et al., 2009).

The paradox of China's new-generation employees who are perplexed by their roles at work and family shows the extent of the WFC, which is uniquely shaped by the only-child status for most of them. As Frone et al. (1992) point out, both demands for work and family duties can be liable to the emergence of WFC, and it is difficult to meet demands in one domain while at the same time to meet demands in the other (Choi, 2008). However, the existing literature has not clearly clarified the extent to which the work engagement and turnover intention are associated with the degree of WFC for new-generation employees in China. To respond to this issue, relevant theoretical explanations and hypotheses need to be established ahead of empirical examination about the central questions.

## **Conceptualisation and hypotheses**

The major framework used in this research is the stressor-strain-outcome framework (Koeske and Koeske, 1993) deployed to understand the construct of the WFC by examining the WFC-work engagement-turnover intention relationships for China's new-generation employees. This framework enables us to comprehend the psychological and behavioural outcomes as a result of individuals' sustained stressors such as troublesome and potentially disruptive events, and prolonged strain that refers to the emotional exhaustion (Koeske and Koeske, 1993). Study has shown links between work-family stressors and employees' attitudinal strain that contributes to

detrimental work consequences (e.g., Allen et al., 2000; Lu, et al., 2009), but few findings are based on research at China's workplace. For China's new-generation employees, their WFC can be regarded as inter-role stressors mainly caused by incompatible demands from work and family roles, which hinder employees' ability to attain professional goals (LePine, Podsakoff and LePine, 2005). Indeed, prolonged exposure to inter-role stressors, like what these Chinese employees have experienced, may lead to disengagement with jobs and reduced work outcomes including lower worker performance and turnover (ibid.).

Following the stressor-strain-outcome perspective, the WFC for China's new-generation employees can be deemed as a stressor, which may strain them mentally and psychologically, and lead to the disengagement from their current jobs and potentially an intention to leave the organization. However, this association is not entirely clear since the framework may overlook the importance of differentiating the challenging and hindering stressors in identifying their impact on employee responses (LePine et al., 2005). It also ignores the social factors that influence employees' behaviour, as the work-family interface are bound to be embedded in the national context varying from political, economic, cultural and social conditions in a given period (Lewis et al., 2007). Considering the contextual heterogeneity and the peculiarity of China's new-generation employees, the enquiry of their WFC issue can be broadened by assessing its dynamic relationships with the employees' turnover intention and work engagement.

Contrary to the findings of the relationship between WFC and turnover intention in the western society, the outcome in the Chinese context is far less adequate and conclusive (Hang-Yue, Foley, and Loi, 2005; Zhang, Griffeth and Fried, 2012). Study has state that as a role stressor, WFC can not only exert a significant impact on emotional exhaustion, but also affect employees' turnover intention (e.g. Hang-Yue, et al., 2005). However, research has also found little association between WFC and turnover intentions (Zhang, et al., 2012). Furthermore, Chinese employees may not need a solution (quitting job) if they generally perceive WFC as matter of fact (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that new-generation employees tend to be less loyal to the organization and they have higher turnover rate than previous generations (Gu, et al., 2010), therefore any conflict in work and family may intensify their intention to leave the organisation. It is common for China's young employees to easily have turnover intention when their current jobs fail to fit their personality and satisfaction, or there is inadequate career promotion prospect (Coffey et al., 2009). As an affluent and better educated generation, they enjoy a wide range of career opportunities to achieve their extroversion and social influence (Yi et al., 2010). On the one hand, new-generation employees have less financial burden so that they are less bounded with 'work for family financial needs and glory' (Ling and Powell, 2001). On the other hand, the all-round love from their parents and grandparents will make them quite individualistic and sensitivity at workplace (Yi et al., 2010) and this may influence these employees'

attitudes dealing with turnover, job satisfaction, and stress management (Lyons and Kuron, 2013). Consequently, withdrawing from job seems to be a reasonable coping mechanism when they encounter any form of WFC (stressors), which can be a catalyst that evolves the turnover intention in the long run as outcome. Thus, we propose:

*H1: The WFC for China's new-generation employees is positively related to their turnover intention.*

Compared with their previous generations, China's new-generation employees possess distinctive personalities and preferences, which can influence the nature of the WFC and work engagement, as well as their relationships. With diversified career ambition and better educational background, young employees will have higher level of work ambition, which is a motivator to encourage themselves to maintain work engagement (Coffey et al., 2009). Thus, the conflict between work and family seems less likely to have serious impact on these employees' mind-set. However, younger generations tend to be less engaged at or bound to work because they tend to hold high value for leisure and low work centrality, and they possess abundant material and social support (Yi et al., 2010). People do need sufficient physical, emotional and psychological resources in order to be engaged at work (Kahn, 1990), and those with limited resources will have difficulties to sustain a high level of work engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Once the antecedent of the conflict between work and family arises, the personal resources for new-generation employees will shrink or disappear, making them less engaged or disengaged with their work. In the words of the stress-strain-outcome framework, WFC (stressor) may consume employees' career motivation and weaken their work engagement (strain). Thus, we propose:

*H2: The WFC for Chinese only-child generation employees is negatively related to their work engagement*

Work engagement refers to positive state of mind that embodies employees' work involvement in forms of energy, time, and effort at work. These may be conducive to pay rise, career development, leader recognition etc., which may strengthen their adhesion with current organisation for ongoing career development. Clear linkages have been found in the literature between work engagement and outcomes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and intent to turnover (Saks, 2006; Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006). This can be explained by the COR theory, which suggests that individuals are fear of losing the protection of their current resources (Hoboll, 2001). Empirical studies have shown that employees with higher level of work engagement are less likely to leave their organisation (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008; Halbesleben, 2010). Given the particular context in which China's new-generation employees have, such features like career savvy may drive them to behave with higher level of engagement at work (Wu and Uen, 2015). Based on these concurrent discussions, it is posited,

*H3: The degree of work engagement for China's new-generation employees is negatively related to their turnover intention*

Existing literature has proved the links between work-family stressors, employees' strain and detrimental work consequences (e.g., Allen et al., 2000; Lu, et al., 2009). As a role stressor, employees' WFC can also exert a significant impact on emotional exhaustion, which in turn affect employees' intentions to leave their organization. (Hang-Yue, et al., 2005). For China's new-generation employees, if they are not motivated to engage work due to incompatible work-family demands, their intention to leave the organisation may be amplified (Li and Lu, 2014; Wang et al., 2014). As the stressor-strain-outcome framework puts it, the WFC of new-generation employees will trigger the psychological strain of work engagement, which in turn will be manifested behaviourally as turnover intention. In a similar vein, Saks' (2006) model has also shown engagement could be experienced emotionally and cognitively, because job characteristics, e.g. WFC, can influence the development of engagement that will mediate the relationship between antecedent and outcomes variables. This suggests the potential mediation effect of work engagement on the degree of WFC influencing employees' turnover intention. Therefore, we propose:

*H4: The degree of work engagement for Chinese new-generation employees can mediate the relationship between their WFC and turnover intention*

## **Methodology**

This research used a deductive approach to test the hypothesis about the relationships of "WFC-work engagement-turnover intention" through questionnaire.

### *Data collection and sample*

In total 226 copies of usable questionnaire were collected, with the rest being either invalid or not collectable, making the respondent rate 90.4 per cent. Data was obtained from Chinese young employees who were born after 1980 and working in urban areas in China's five cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Changsha and Kunming in 2014. 250 people were selected from multi-sectors in these cities through convenience and snowball sampling method considering the advantage that helps to target qualified participants effectively (Morgan, 2008). Each questionnaire was distributed through emails to individual participants and the completed ones were directly emailed back to the researchers to safeguard privacy. Questionnaires were prefaced with the objectives of the research and a consent form and information sheet that explained the purpose of this survey, with the emphasis of research ethics issues such as confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. The initial questionnaire was in English before being translated into Chinese as the survey language, and a translation-back-translation

procedure was used to ensure accuracy of the translation (Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike, 1973).

### *Measures*

All the variables in this study were measured with well-established instruments to guarantee the validity, reliability and comparability of the research (Gutek Searle, and Klepa, 1991). All the scales were five-point Likert-type scales.

*WFC.* An 8-item scale (Gutek et.al., 1991) was used to measure WFC. A sample question is that 'After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do'. The coefficient  $\alpha$  was .80 for this scale, providing satisfactory reliability.

*Turnover intention.* We assessed turnover intention with a 3-item scale selected from Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Camman, Fishman, Jenkins, and Klesh, 1979) with the coefficient  $\alpha$  .78. One sample item is 'How likely will you actively look for a new job in the next year?'.

*Work engagement.* A 9-item scale based on the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–Short Form (UWES–9, Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova, 2006) was used to measure work engagement. This 9-item scale consists of the subscales of vigor (e.g., 'at my work, I feel that I am bursting with energy'), dedication (e.g., 'I am proud of the work that I do'), and absorption (e.g., 'I am immersed in my work'). The coefficient  $\alpha$  of the total 9-item scale is .80.

*Controls.* A number of influential variables, especially individual demographic differences that have been controlled in previous work–family research, were deployed in the analysis (e.g., Grzywacz and Butler, 2005; Hammer, Cullen, Neal, Sinclair, and Shafiro, 2005). Given that, gender, age, education, marital status, number of people need to be cared in the family, working hours per week and length of service were employed as controls in this analysis.

### *Data analysis*

SPSS was employed to assist the data analysis. First, the reliability and validity of each scale was examined. Second, we conducted the correlation and regression analysis to test the proposed hypothesis. Person's bivariate correlations were employed to test the relationships between WFC, work engagement, and turnover, which intended to provide the validity to examine the mediating effect of work engagement in the following regression analysis. The mediation analysis was followed by the four steps of procedure suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations*

Table 1 illustrates descriptive statistics and Pearson's bivariate correlations for the total sample. The score for WFC is slightly above the midpoint mark (2.67) of the 5-point scale, suggesting generally respondents experienced relatively considerable level of WFC, compared to the typical western research using the same measurement of (e.g. Frone, Yardley and Markel, 1997; Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams, 2000). With the exception of working hours and age, WFC had a null relationship with the other control variables. The relationship between WFC and working hours is consistent with both Western and Chinese findings that identify working hours is the primary antecedents of WFC (e.g. Frone, et al., 2000; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, and Baltes, 2011; Lu, et al., 2009). There is a negative but very weak correlation between WFC and age ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which is possibly due to the young participants who do not show apparent heterogeneity in terms of age (Mean = 24.6 years old, SD = 1.7).

A surprising correlation has been found as gender and WFC are not clearly correlated. Table 2 also confirms the result where descriptive statistics, Pearson's bivariate correlations, and T-test are shown for the male and female groups, respectively. Despite the significant correlation and variation between gender and turnover intention, there is insignificant, non-variant correlation between gender and demographic variables related to traditional gender identity (e.g. number of people needs to care, education attainment, and working hours) in both tables.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Pearson's bivariate correlations for total sample

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	.48	.50	-									
2. Age	24.60	1.70	-.12	-								
3. Marital Status	.14	.35	.12	.17*	-							
4. Number of people financially support	1.42	.61	-.11	.09	-.03	-						
5. Education attainment	1.90	.46	-.06	-.06	.13*	-.10	-					
6. Hours devote on Average per week	43.65	8.85	-.10	-.04	-.11	.03	-.04	-				
7. Length of service	1.49	.87	.05	.43**	.08	.03	-.09	-.13	-			
8. Work engagement	3.15	.64	-.05	-.07	-.06	.13*	.26**	-.01	-.07	(.89)		
9. Turnover intention	1.73	.93	.19**	.05	.05	-.03	-.12	-.04	-.04	-.41**	(.82)	
10. WFC	2.67	.59	.08	-.13*	-.08	-.06	-.02	.19**	-.04	-.14*	.17*	-

Notes: 1) N=226 individuals. The numbers in parenthesis on the diagonal of the table are Cronbach's alphas estimates

2) \*p <.05; \*\*p<.01; two-tailed test.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics, Pearson's bivariate correlations, and T-test for male and female sample

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	-	.22*	.21*	-.17	.32	.54*	0.12	0.28	-.17*
2. Marital Status	.12*	-	.12*	.13	.85	.10	-.32	.12	-.05
3. Number of people financially support	.23	.32	-	-.15	.04	.04	.15*	-.12*	-.09
4. Education attainment	-.08	.17*	.86	-	-.21	-.14	.15**	-.14	-.08
5. Hours devote on Average per week	.56	-.23	.34*	-.32	-	-.15	-.03	-.02	.13**
6. Length of service	.86*	.53*	.55	-.13	-.16	-	-.12	-.08	-.03
7. Work engagement	-.45	-.08	.18*	.37**	-.03	-.05	-	-.24**	-.18*
8. Turnover intention	.12	.35	-.12	-.24	-.06	-.06	-.58**	-	.26*
9. WFC	-.09*	-.02	-.16	-.06	.25**	-.07	-.10*	.08*	-
Male (n=108)									
Mean	25.3	.08	1.40	2.95	44.12	1.32	2.75	1.56	2.55
SD	1.89	.48	.89	.66	5.23	0.56	0.86	1.01	.39
Female (n=118)									
Mean	23.9	.20	1.44	2.85	43.18	1.66	3.55	2.90	2.79
SD	1.51	.22	.33	.26	12.47	1.18	.42	.85	.79
Mean difference test (t-value)	.29	.67*	1.74	3.55	1.80	1.12	2.51*	1.33*	1.10

Notes: 1) The numbers in the upper part are correlations for female managers. The numbers in the lower part are correlations for male managers.

2) \*p <.05; \*\*p<.01; two-tailed test.



### Testing hypotheses

The results of correlation and regression are analysed to test the main hypotheses. In terms of inter-correlations among the variables above, the statistics significantly shows that WFC was positively related to turnover intention ( $r=.17$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and negatively related to work engagement ( $r=-.14$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and work engagement was negatively related to turnover intention ( $r=-.41$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Therefore, Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 are supported. These correlations between WFC, work engagement and turnover provide the validity to examine the mediating effect of work engagement in regression analysis.

To test Hypothesis 4, Preacher and Hayes' (2008) four steps method was deployed and the statistic results are shown in Table 2. First, WFC as an independent variable shows the significant total effect on turnover intention (c path). Second, the independent variable is related to the mediator, work engagement, as we presumed. Here the result shows that WFC has a significant impact on work engagement (a path) ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Third, the mediator needs to be related to dependent variable, and the result shows that work engagement has a direct effect on turnover intention (b path) ( $\beta = -.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ). At the last step, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable needs to be non-significant when the mediator is included in the model. The result shows that the direct effect of WFC on turnover intention is insignificant when the work engagement indicator was entered (c' path) ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Since all of the conditions are justified, work engagement does demonstrate a mediating role for the relationship between WFC and turnover intention. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 3: Results of Mediation regression analysis

Independent variable to mediator (a path)		
	coeff	p
WFC-Work engagement	-.15	.04
Direct effects of mediators on dependent variable (b paths)		
	coeff	p
Work engagement- Turnover intention	-.56	.00
Total effect of independent variable on dependent variable (c path)		
	coeff	p
WFC	.26	.01
Direct effect of independent variable on dependent variable (c' path)		
	coeff	p
WFC- Work engagement-Turnover intention	.18	.07

## Discussion

Our empirical examination shows interesting findings about China's new-generation employees regarding their WFC, turnover intention and work engagement. Although most outcomes are in line with the hypotheses, three aspects of the results are worthwhile to be discussed including their WFC experience, the impact of gender on WFC, and the relationships of WFC-engagement-turnover.

### *WFC for China's new-generation employees*

Data indicates that the China's new-generation employees experience considerable level of WFC, particularly time-based conflicts such as long working hours as a major antecedent causing such conflict. On average, the respondents work 43.65 hours a week, higher than the normal contracted 40 hours and quite close to the maximum weekly working hours (44 hours) required by the Chinese labour law. A plausible reason to explain the overworking phenomenon is that these employees are early career tasters and have less caring responsibilities to worry so that they can prioritise work to gain potential advancement opportunities. In addition, both the external market and business pressures have intensified the long working situation, which not only increases the burden for temporary workload and taken-work-home, but also causes strain-based and behaviour-based conflicts (Hyman, Scholarios and Baldry, 2005). This significant finding highlights the need to address the challenge of balancing work and family for these group of employees who are under-researched (Coffey et al., 2009).

The research echoes the view that generally there is a rising demand for employees' family caring responsibilities with the progress of life course (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000). However, while our result shows the young Chinese employees endure considerable WFC, this may not necessarily challenge the prevailing ecological perspective on work-family relations. Since the age range of this new-generation participants is converged in the younger end, future research needs to explore a wider range of age span in order to get a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

### *How much does gender account for WFC?*

Our finding shows that gender does not significantly influence the level of WFC for the new-generation employees. This is unexpected because in the existing literature, the consensus seems to suggest that work-family interface is clearly a gendered issue in China (Ling and Power, 2001; Choi et al., 2008; Coffey et al., 2009). One possible explanation is that new-generation employees grew up and lived in a more gender equal background, fostering a more gender egalitarian workplace (Woodhams, Xian and Lupton, 2015). With the rising awareness of gender equality and diversity, contemporary Chinese working people is willing to involve in and share household

division of labour and caring duties regardless of gender (Zhao, Zhang and Foley, 2017).

On the other hand, the tendency of gender equalitarian identification has not fully established to eliminate the invisible rooted gender inequality. Data shows the young female and male employees showed significantly difference in their turnover intention ( $t$ -value = 1.33\*,  $p < .05$ ), and the former, females have higher level of WFC-related turnover intention than their counterpart ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Considering women's traditional commitment to family, female employees still play a major role for family carer while they are required to work full-time as hard as their male counterparts (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). This is perhaps why women are more likely to quit their jobs to support families than male employees, because they have a lot more pressure to satisfy the demands from both domains (Woodhams et al., 2015). Despite their better education background, when China's young generation of female employees enter the labour market, they are still subject to recruitment barriers due to social prejudice and policy deficiencies (Liu, Zhang and Li, 2008). Although our findings show WFC is not significantly related to gender, it is perhaps too early to conclude that there is a definite gender-neutral, egalitarian discourse in work-family interface for China's new-generation employees.

#### *Dynamics of WFC-engagement-turnover at the workplace*

Using the stressor-strain-outcome parameter, we are able to depict the dynamic relationships between WFC, engagement and turnover intention for China's new-generation employees. As the finding shows, WFC is likely to trigger psychological strain and manifest negative behaviours such as turnover or intention to turnover (Allen, et al., 2000; Boyar, et al., 2003; Haar, 2004). This corresponds to previous studies showing WFC, as an important antecedent of job effectiveness, is associated with stress-related outcomes at work and family in both western and Chinese research (e.g. Allen, et al., 2000; Ford, et al., 2007; Lu and Cooper, 2015). However, unlike many existing findings that are overwhelmed by the relationship between turnover intention and individuals' personal characteristics and work values (e.g. Verquer, Beehr, Wagner, 2003; Van Vianen, De Pater, and Van, 2007), the current study shows the resultant effect of WFC on employees' turnover intention. The result reiterates the assumption that quitting job is one possible solution to deal with WFC since the new-generation Chinese employees are experiencing unprecedented economic expansion period when modern life and family are generating significant amount of conflict (Coffey et al., 2009).

Evidently the level of new-generation employees' work engagement can have a negative impact on the effect of WFC and turnover intention. This is in line with the existing work engagement literature (e.g. Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2008), as WFC can be a stressor to disengage people at work either the conflict sources from work or family. Nevertheless, this effect tends to be less reflected

on the engaged employees who are less likely to leverage their organisational loyalty as a result. Particularly, the working hours and work engagement are positively interplayed in the research. While engaged employees work longer does not mean compulsively work overtime (Schaufeli, Taris, and Bakker, 2006), the number of working hours does reflect certain level of work engagement (Mauno, Kinnunen, and Ruokolainen, 2007), and engaged workers are more willing to 'go the extra miles' for their work (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). As specified by the COR theory, time involvement coupled with energy and resources investment enable employees tend to retain in their work positions for resources conservation. The China's new generation may be well-versed with the logic as their career-oriented feature in young adulthood may incorporate with certain level of work engagement to buffer the detrimental effect of WFC on turnover intention.

Our findings validate the mediating role of work engagement, and this is consistent with the claim that work engagement can be viewed as a mediator when studying the antecedent and outcome of WFC (Saks, 2006; Agarwal, Datta, Bake-Beard and Bhargava, 2012). However, due to the changes of work and family demands, the nature of WFC and the level of engagement can vary in different circumstances (Koeske and Koeske, 1993; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Partly this explains why the China's new-generation employees in our study do not seem to be bothered too much by the high level of WFC, for their turnover intention could be buffered and alleviated if they were more engrossed and absorbed by their work. It shows that the level of work engagement can play a motivational-affective effect to trigger employees' job crafting behaviour that adapts to the uncertainty and dynamic from their work and family domains (Lu et al., 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The research sheds light to the theory and practice of HRM with respect to employees' work-family interface. By assessing the under-studied population, China's new generation employees, we applied the established stressor-strain-outcome model and validated the fresh propositions of the research. Our findings address the theoretical construct on 'WFC-work attitude outcome-behaviour outcome', with work engagement being specifically examined as a mediator to underline the dynamic association between WFC and turnover intention. Responding to the calls for paying more attention to employees' work-family issues in non-western context (Lu and Cooper, 2015), the current study offers new research venue to examine the behaviours and the generational characters for a particular group. Theoretically, it adds on to the work-family-generation literature by deploying a cross-disciplinary perspective to offer explanatory, rather than descriptive, considerations.

Practically, the findings of this study demonstrate the compelling task for Chinese organisations to review or update their HR strategies in managing employee

commitment and motivation associated with WFC, as most of them need to pay attention to manage large amount of young generation employees. The increasing personal work and family demands accompanying with economic competition and social transition challenge contemporary Chinese employees to balance their work and family (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Organisational support on employees' work-family issues has been called in work practices, which offers a requirement and opportunity for Chinese organisations to scope their HRM strategies that address employee values and concerns to meet employees' work-life needs (Lu and Cooper, 2015). Prior to this, the management commitment needs to be required to respect employees' diverse interests and foster the adaptive family-friendly organizational culture to initiate and implement the strategical work-family/life management (Chandra, 2012). Particularly, the gender awareness needs to be taken into consideration when designing and adopting organisational practices and culture. Since the seemingly blurred gendered image of WFC shown in this study remains difficult to challenge the fact of gender inequality in spite of overall improvement on gender pay and other aspects of opportunities (Cooke, 2005). Female employees are still marginalised in the competitive workplace with respect to their caring role at home.

An inevitable question for the organizational HRM practice, therefore, is how to effectively resolve the WFC so that Chinese new-generation employees can engage with work rather than considering job-hopping? Implementing bespoke strategies on work-life/family practices seems to be potential answer for organizations, specifically those strategies appropriate to these young generation employees. The conventional financial rewards or material incentives used in many organisations may not be the best way for the new-generation employees because these motivational means cannot address the deep root of WFC (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). These employees can be dedicated to work as much as their previous generation, but they are more enthusiastic about family and personal lives (Wu and Uen, 2015), hence there is a need to balance their demands for emotional empathy and interpersonal success. Thus, creative employment and HR practices, such as flexible working hours or additional paid leaves, may be effective to ease the tension between work and family for these new-generation employees.

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